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Here you find the introductory and the final chapter, written by P. Vandermeersch, in R. KESSLER & P. VANDERMEERSCH (eds.), *God, Biblical Stories and Psychoanalytical Understanding*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2001: 'Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Religious Texts. Some Basics' (9-27) en 'Looking Back at Sodom. Psychoanalysis and Diachronic Reading' (187-198).

Chapter 1
Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Religious Texts. Some Basics
Patrick Vandermeersch

The Lure of Hidden Knowledge

The popular notion of psychoanalysis in our culture is often one of a racy and prejudiced kind of translation. Both the highbrow and the lowbrow seem to reduce analysis to the one-dimensional basic concept of our human condition: libido. Whereas others simply become enraptured with beautiful works of art, with spiritual or mystical language or high-flown ideals, the analyst monotonously points to the small difference that renders all major cultural distinctions void: sex. Whenever obscure statements are made, strange symptoms occur, or the wildest delusions flourish, the analyst manages to interpret the incomprehensible unambiguously by pointing out that all of us are thinking about the same thing all the time: sex. If you present someone with a bouquet of flowers, the analyst will remind you that flowers are a plant's sex organs. When you tell your analyst that you are troubled by the fact that you sometimes feel a severe anxiety attack coming on that you can only avert by frenetic counting, he will smile reassuringly. Without a single word being said, you *know* that he knows: once again, although less obviously, sex is the issue.

In addition to this clichéd notion of the monomaniac outlook that reduces everything to sex, there is another cliché lurking behind the popular image of psychoanalysis, namely the idea that the psychoanalyst possesses secret knowledge. Imagine an ordinary person who is caught unawares when seated next to an analyst in a train compartment or at dinner. He or she will be startled and think "Oh, I had better keep quiet, because you will probably have summed me up already!". In dealing with colleagues at the university, this preconception usually plays its part as well. As academics feel the need to behave differently than ordinary people, the reaction adopts a more provocative style: "As you are an analyst, show me that you can

discover more in my texts than I could do with my own tools, but let us confront the outcome with an ‘objective’ standard.” In fact, the same bias appears: psychoanalysis should be a method to acquire hidden knowledge — or it should disappear.

In their therapies, analysts should make a virtue of necessity. If they are to help people to truly explore fundamental questions, they apparently have no initial alternative but to uphold the fiction that they *know*, since it is seemingly this fiction of omniscience that sustains the human search for truth. Only gradually are people able to abandon the illusion that others have a deeper understanding of the things they lack, and apparently this progressive process of questioning and qualifying the absolute knowledge others are believed to possess is the way “healing” occurs as a result of psychoanalysis.

In the academic world, where you are not supposed to put your colleagues on the couch, you cannot but insist time and again on what you can actually do with psychoanalysis and on what is simply bluff. Therefore, the purpose of this text is to give some essential landmarks to allow us the ability to grasp the different existing types of psychoanalytic interpretation and their possible relevance to the interpretation of religious texts. Hereby we will follow a historic pathway, as it reflects the logic one becomes involved in when entering psychoanalytic thinking. We will illustrate this with some typical examples taken from the existing psychoanalytic literature.

A certain amount of confusion is possible. When we start, for instance, with examples of the years 1910-1920 (the period psychoanalysis was just beginning to apply its newly gained insights to literature and religious symbolism), it is clear that we will find a great deal of historical and methodological presupposition stemming from the biblical and religious scholarship of those days. For instance, we will find opinions on the origin of Jewish monotheism, dating it back as far as the second millennium, which can hardly be held according to our actual knowledge. I would like to ask you to disregard this and discuss the examples only as far as they illustrate a certain type of psychoanalytic approach which, from recent psychoanalytic insight, is also frequently considered out of date.

In this survey of psychoanalytic thinking, one should be aware of two important shifts that have occurred between the time of Freud's own thinking and today:

1. Whereas Freud was originally interested in neurosis and thus in intrapsychic conflicts wherein sexuality played an important part, recent psychoanalysis has given more and more attention to earlier stages of human development and the way something like an ego was developed in its most elementary form. To say it with keywords: elder psychoanalysis was interested in the Oedipal problem, more recent psychoanalysis in the pre-Oedipal. Although most psychoanalysts welcome the attention given to the pre-Oedipal as a valuable new insight, there is disagreement on the question of whether you can reach the pre-Oedipal directly, foregoing the Oedipal. In fact, some analysts are afraid that this could be an excuse for ceasing to pay attention to Oedipal and sexual problems, and confirming repression mechanisms instead of solving them.

2. The earlier psychoanalysts were interested in literature and religion because they recognized themes that they had also discovered in the minds of their individual patients. It was clear that they did not only take pleasure in it, but that they also made use of these texts as a kind of proof of the reality of their own insights. The fact that their patient's fantasies were to be found at random in human culture testified that psychoanalysts had not suggested them to their patients. In recent years, this type of "psychoanalytic interpretation" has given way to an approach whereby insights of psychoanalysis are applied not to the content or the writer, but to the reader of texts. The question is: what can we learn from psychoanalytic praxis about the psychology of reading? To put it in key-words again: the attention has shifted from the (possibly hidden) content of a text toward the "reader response".

I should emphasize that these two shifts are completely independent of each other. In principle, we could have four basic types of psychoanalytic interpretation:

1. directed to the hidden content of the text, focusing on the Oedipal level;
2. directed to the hidden content of the text, focusing on the pre-Oedipal level;
3. directed to the reader response, focusing on the Oedipal level;
4. directed to the reader response, focusing on the pre-Oedipal level.

Directed to the Hidden Content of the Text, Focusing on the Oedipal Level

Let us start with the elder type of psychoanalytic interpretation, which was inclined to repeatedly insist upon the (hidden) sexual content of many myths and symbols and was especially interested in the Oedipus complex. Let us review the context.

Psychoanalysis took its origin in Freud's experience that our mind is not inclined to accept all possible knowledge, as we are spontaneously inclined to believe. On the contrary, our mind tries to avoid knowledge, especially about some of our secret wishes. For this reason, there is something in us that discards many of our wishes before they reach the level of consciousness. To use Freud's own term, *repression* takes place. The wishes that become in this way invisible to us have mostly to do with sex and they are rooted in our very early childhood, when the attachment to our parents was very important to us.

From the discovery of the existence of repression, two strains of thoughts proceeded. First, what is the content of those repressed wishes? The answer was already given: sex. But which kind of sex? The answer to this question brought Freud to a more close investigation of the very early stages of our sexual development.

Secondly, what is the motor behind the repression process? What is the agent? Here the answer has to be: something in us that does not fit with the rest of our self. There is thus a kind of split in our self, whereby one part of our "I" struggles with another. It seems as if this repressing part were particularly touchy on sexual matters. This raises the question: how can we conceive such a part of our "I" so concerned with sex that it represses it, while sexual drives are also a part of our "I"?

Freud's answer is: our "I" is so touchy on sexual matters and represses some sexual representations as if they were dangerous, because our

“I” is not given at birth. It must establish itself through a process of identification, whereby sexual identity plays an important part. Here we come to the well-known but commonly misunderstood theme of narcissism and the Oedipus complex. For better understanding, let us go back to early childhood. A baby does not experience its body as a whole, but as a conglomerate of isolated body parts that can be source of pleasure or pain. There is, however, no experience of unity, and this is a source of anxiety. The child overcomes this anxiety by becoming fascinated with the image of its own body; it falls in a certain way in love with its own image, just as the mythical Narcissus.¹ For some reason — I still follow Freud, who focuses on the psychological model of the boy — the genitals play an important part in this beloved image of one’s own body. This image becomes enriched with the representations of the body of other, stronger figures of the same sex, especially the father. Later more characteristics of this father figure are copied and a process of *identification* occurs.²

Unfortunately, there is something tricky in this seemingly satisfactory solution of the construction of one’s identity by means of identification. The father appears to be not only a model, but also a rival. The child’s mother is the father’s wife. At a certain moment, the mother becomes as well a sexual object for the child; to use the cliché, he also wants to marry her. Incidentally, I should add that it is not entirely clear in Freud’s model as to exactly why the child becomes sexually attracted to his mother. A congruent answer could be that it simply results from the fact that he identifies with the father. In any case, the admiration that underlies identification becomes mixed with rivalry; and it is a very difficult rivalry, for thinking of eliminating your rival can mean, at the same time, annihilating your model. Who would you then be, if you were to do that? Thus, in order not to dispose of your identity gained by narcissism and identification, a special psychical function is created — the “Ego-ideal” — that will repress those wishes that could be threatening to your laboriously gained identity, your feeling of being an “I”.

Interest in the Oedipal problem induced many psychological studies on religion whereby the rebellion or submission to the father, the feeling

1. S. Freud, *Narzissmus* 1914.

2. S. Freud, *Massenpsychologie* 1921, pp. 115-116, Engl. tr. p. 105.

of guilt and the observation of rituals took a central place. Circumcision, e.g., became an especially interesting topic. One should note, however, that this type of analysis was not only dictated by psychoanalytic concerns; religious science also insisted upon that topic. Psychoanalysts eagerly read the book of W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (2nd ed.: 1907). In this book, sacrifice was presented as the cornerstone for further study of the intrinsic logic of Jewish religion. One can understand that many psychoanalysts were very interested in such an approach, where their own interest in the repressing function of the Ego-ideal (called the “Super-ego” in Freud’s later work) met support in the study of the history of religion.

As an example, I take an article from 1930 on the dreams in the Joseph-cycle.³ I restrict myself to a small part of the pharaoh’s dream, in which he sees seven fat cows coming out of the Nile, whereafter seven lean cows follow, the lean cows proceeding to eat the fat ones (Gen 41:1-7).

Let us not discuss the quite questionable fact that the author takes the dream as an actual dream, and not as a part of a story one would find in a book with many redactional layers. Let us also skip the discussion about earlier and actual knowledge of the historical context, and focus on the part concerning psychoanalytic theory. The core is that there is a feeling of guilt involved, and that this feeling resulted in eliminating some essential representation one would expect in the dream, in so far as a dream is shaped by wish-fulfillment.

According to the author, E. Lorenz, the representation of the cows emerging from the Nile is a theme a pharaoh should well know. The bull Osiris is often depicted in the company of seven cows. Thus there is a reference to the fertility of the Nile and, quoting the Hymn to Amenemhet III, our author continues by arguing that the pharaoh is required to guarantee that fertility. We then find in Chapter 110 of the *Book of the Dead* a bull with seven cows that are supposed to feed the dead. When a pharaoh’s father died, he was believed to become Osiris. Thus, according to our author, we come to the conclusion that the dream’s essential point is the erasing of the representation of the bull that should have accompanied the

3. E. Lorenz, Träume des Pharao 1930.

cows. Thus the cows represent the father's wives, but the image of the bull has been censored as it referred to the pharaoh's dead father, and the pharaoh felt guilty and anxious for having taken over his father's position.

We see what is at stake here: guilt is an important psychic fact, and is linked with the fact that we want to take over a fatherly position, which puts us in rivalry with a father figure that has, to this point, been a beloved model for ourselves. In psychoanalysis, attention was paid to religion in so far as it could be considered an attempt of reconciliation with a father figure. Religion occasionally succeeded therein, but at times, on the contrary, it brought people into radical submission, whereby one got the impression of participating in the grandiosity of a god by being annihilated. Sacrifice could be understood in this way as an absolute, but masochistic, kick.

Shifting to the Pre-Oedipal or the Pre-Genital

After Freud's death and World War II, the focus of psychoanalytic theory has shifted from the Oedipal to the pre-Oedipal stage in human psychological development. There were two reasons for this shift. First, there was a special interest in applying psychoanalytic practice to children, and to help them overcome their problems before they became neurotic adults, needing the couch for years on end. Secondly, there were the psychotic patients, whom some psychoanalysts believed could also benefit from psychoanalytic therapy. Others did not agree, but they acknowledged that an understanding of psychosis could give more insight into the very early strata of the human psyche. By studying these patients, one could at least understand many primitive mechanisms of the human mind. This could be useful in developing an adequate psychological technique to bring relief to psychotic patients, or at least gain a more clear insight into what kind of therapeutic approach should or should not be attempted.

The names of two rival women should be noted here: Anna Freud, Sigmund's daughter, and Melanie Klein. Both were working with children and were founders of different schools of psychoanalysis. Both were convinced that something like an ego was present in a child from birth — an idea alien to Sigmund Freud, as we have seen. Both insisted upon the defense mechanisms this small ego was handling from the very beginning.

Anna Freud made a (too consistent) list of these mechanisms and showed that they still operated in adult minds. She was the “founding mother” of the ego-psychology. Klein went a step further and insisted upon the fact that the most primitive stage of the ego was in fact the result of a primitive defense mechanism, more precisely of the projective mechanism, by which the ego made its first attempts to construct an outer and inner world. One might even say that the mechanism preceded the existence of an ego, and that the ego was a result of the mechanism.

In the next texts you will read more about Klein’s theory and its influence, especially in psychology of religion. I restrict myself to two of her basic notions. First: the most elementary way we construct ourselves is to split reality into bad things and good things. This split is experienced initially as something very physical. Some things are pleasant, others are not; actually better expressed not in words, but by “oh” and “bah”, with some distinctions in pronunciation according to your language. The good is understood as “belonging to my body” while the bad is situated in the threatening, outside world. This tendency to split things into radically good and radically bad can, however, continue later, and we probably all know people for whom you are perfect, fulfilling all their needs, and thus you are all for them and they cannot miss you; or you are not perfect, thus radically bad, and immediately they drop you, saying that you have radically disillusioned them, that they had never expected that from you, that you are a hypocrite, etc.

We come to a second central notion, not from M. Klein herself but from one of her followers, D.W. Winnicott. He stressed the fact that a child needs a climate of confidence wherein it gradually works through these primitive splits and starts to accept reality as it is: a mix of good and bad. This particular climate is the “transitional sphere”; you have likely heard of the teddy bear as its typical exponent. This notion of transitional sphere has brought some Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysts to a reappraisal of religion, seeing in it a possibly healthy continuation of the support offered by this transitional sphere.

Klein’s influence has been very important, and her thinking is predominant today in Anglo-Saxon psychology of religion. Before describing her influence further, I would like to insist upon a typical and essential point in the theory of Sigmund Freud that Klein silently puts aside: the im-

portance of the father. As we have seen, Sigmund Freud was truly aware of the importance of pre-Oedipal stages, and insisted upon the importance of the father in this regard as well. Sexual identity, gained by narcissism and prepared by a first, primitive identification with a potent personage of the same sex, was a prerequisite for entering the Oedipus complex. I believe that this was a truly important issue — how could you otherwise understand the introduction of sexuality into a child's mind, and how could you otherwise understand the importance of homoeroticism in all people's psychosexual development? The attention to these elements, however, disappears in Anna Freud's ego-psychology and in the Kleinian school. Whereas Sigmund Freud was continuously interested in the importance of the father and the father's sex, the followers of A. Freud and M. Klein almost exclusively deal with the mother. When they rediscovered the father relatively late, the only task they gave to him was the introduction of a separation between mother and child, for a too-close relationship is not only a source of happiness (M. Mahler). The importance of the father's sex, such an important thing in S. Freud's mind, is yet to be rediscovered by many americanized psychoanalytic minds.

From this last statement, you understand that I would like to return to Europe, where we come across two important French psychoanalysts, both deeply influenced by Klein, but who did not forego the father: Françoise Dolto and Jacques Lacan. Lacan especially is well known, but I also mention Dolto as she was able to give a detailed and clear account of what their common insights meant to the practice of psychoanalysis, especially the therapy of children. Lacanian thought is complex, carried on in frequently cryptic and esoteric writings, and transmitted by intolerant and sometimes sectarian psychoanalytic groups. One should, however, be aware that Lacanian psychoanalysis is at this moment the branch of psychoanalysis that is still expanding, and that its views are very influential in Latin America in particular.

I will mention only two essential views from Lacan in respect to the problem at stake here, namely the importance of pre-Oedipal stages in human psychology:

1. Lacan attempts to fill the gap between the primitive mechanisms described by Klein and the appearance of sexual interest in a child. How

does a child become aware that there is something like sex? According to Lacan, it is through the child's realization that a baby is not the only love object of a mother, but that there is also someone else she loves and for whom she leaves the child alone but too often. As a result of this, the child idealizes the male genital, as if this were the hidden, but very effective, instrument to seduce mothers. You should not forget the role of the phallus, the male genital, in a child's fantasy! In order to insist upon this point — that one needs to understand the later sexual problems that can disturb a human mind — Lacan prefers to call the pre-Oedipal the pre-genital.

2. The fascination for the male organ is replaced by fascination for symbols that represent masculinity and femininity. This means that one frequently finds not only as, e.g., in Jung's theory, a substitution of the penis or vagina by other representations (e.g., a male taking his key out of his pocket long before coming to the door of his house, or pressing a tube of toothpaste in the middle as if it were a sexual organ, etc.). Instead, the essential is that boys and girls refer to distinctions introduced by culture to shape a certain social order. They accept that there are parents and children, that parents are children of grandparents, that there are boys and girls, and they give importance to the coincidental ways a culture symbolizes these distinctions. According to Lacan, the essential element of identification and the Oedipal complex lies therein: that one accepts that the cultural setting devolves to you a well-defined place in the "symbolic order". You can accept or reject this place, but you cannot escape the fact that it is imposed on you as something factual you must cope with.⁴

To Focus on the Text and its Writer or to Focus on the Reader?

In order to follow a systematic track, we should now look at an example of a psychoanalytic interpretation directed at the hidden context of the text, focusing on the pre-Oedipal level. This, however, hardly exists, as another shift took place in the same period, although in principle independent of the shift from the Oedipal to the pre-Oedipal: the shift from content analysis

4. S. Weber, Rückkehr 1978.

to reader response. As a result, interest in the pre-Oedipal is mainly linked with interest in reader response. Let us begin by explaining the latter.

Texts are designed to be read or, at least, to be listened to; they address a reader, or listener. They move something inside the reader, introduce into the reader's mind specific expectations, and provoke particular reactions.⁵ Expectations and reactions, however, can differ a lot. They can be rooted in different structures or levels of the human psyche. This is, of course, determined partly by the personality of the reader, but also partly by the text that addresses specific aspects of the reader's psychology. To address someone with symbols is one way, to give precise information another. One can write poetry, one can wish to mobilize one's conscience in a prophetic way, or one can claim to be only describing in detail what has happened (see the beginning of Luke). Texts can evoke compassion, admiration or horror, but also irritation, an experience of absurdity or even the fear of becoming mad. Not only the contents of the message, but also the form of the text is responsible for this.⁶

Thus, the modern trend in studying literature along psychoanalytic lines focuses on the reader. A question not to be overlooked in this respect is: is something special happening to the reader when he or she knows something about psychoanalysis? This question is challenging enough when we look at psychoanalytic practice; what makes the difference in your listening when you have a piece of psychoanalytic theory in mind? But where an analysand can refuse an interpretation, a text cannot react. This prompts a still more difficult question: what is the motive that brings someone to find pleasure in taking an analytical position, be it in relation to a patient or a text?

These questions resulted in the psychoanalytic experience of the "counter-transference" (the conscious but also partly unconscious reaction of the analyst to the patient) becoming the starting point in investigating in

5. In the Anglo-Saxon world, this shift to the "reader response interpretation" is linked with the name of N. Holland, who showed how differently several readers interpret the same text. In his theory, he lays the emphasis upon the "identity theme". See his books: *5 Readers* 1975; *Dynamics* 1975; *Critical I* 1992.

6. In studying the Bible, a psychological approach thus must study not only source criticism, but also *Formgeschichte*.

more detail the psychology of the reading of a text.⁷ One would be hard pressed to attain consensus on how exactly this should be done in the study of literature, because with the theme of “counter-transference” we arrive at the most difficult discussion, one that divides the psychoanalytic world itself. Whether transference and counter-transference exist is not the question; less clear is how one must handle them within therapy, as well as to what you can learn from both experiences about “reality”. With respect to these questions, the psychoanalytic world is thoroughly divided.

Directed to the Reader Response, Focusing on the Oedipal Level

Leaving the harsh discussion on the very nature of transference, we can learn a great deal from the pioneering work of B. Bettelheim on the way a text addresses a reader in a very precise manner.⁸ Anyone experienced in telling fairy tales to children knows that they will be fascinated by hearing the same story over and over again, that they often have a clear preference for particular tales, and that they cannot bear to have the narrator change or delete even a single detail. According to Bettelheim, such a fairy tale has a clear psychological function for the child. On the one hand, the tale manages to create a fantastic, magical world that may frighten the child to a certain degree, but about which he or she is also curious. It is therefore usually only people whom the child trusts completely, or reassuring figures such as Mother Goose, who are allowed to tell fairy tales. Thus, a different and compelling world is evoked, which suggests experiences as yet unknown, but in a form that allows the child to distance him/herself to a certain extent from things that may become too distressing if taken literally. This is an example of what Winnicott calls the “transitional sphere”. On the other hand, fairy tales impart lessons. In symbolic terms, the tale teaches the child how to handle impulses.

Snow White is a typical fairy tale dealing with the problems of female adolescents, and conveys an underlying message about the direction

7. In the German literature this approach is linked with the name of C. Pietzcker. For a synthetic sketch of his method, see the first part of his *Lesend Interpretieren* 1992. Further information in W. Schönau, *Einführung* 1991.

8. Br. Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment* 1977.

in which the solution to these problems may be found. If this statement is made out of the blue, people usually laugh. However, if one asks adults if they remember how the tale begins, it usually turns out that several seemingly unimportant details have stuck in their memories. Most people, for example, remember the queen, daydreaming in the window, who pricks her finger and loses three drops of blood. If one continues to listen, one will hear how “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” paves the way for the Oedipal conflict. A girl, who identifies herself with Snow White when listening to the tale, hears that there will be a time when the mirror will tell her that it is not the queen but she herself who is the fairest, thus that she is destined to become a rival of her (step)mother. This mother wants to kill her, according to the tale, and the girl learns that it is not actually wicked if she has notions about a struggle to death. The tale then indeed dutifully follows the Freudian scheme by recounting how Snow White manages to survive and seeks refuge with the seven dwarves, who allow her to stay with them if she is prepared to clean, cook and do the washing-up. Is there a better image to express the latency phase — so Bettelheim wonders — because although the dwarves are unmistakably male (consider: creatures wearing pointed caps who regularly disappear into holes), they have no sexual significance for Snow White. Consider that it is emphasized that Snow White nonetheless tries out all the beds, that none of them fits, and that, since she must sleep somewhere, all the dwarves in turn will stay up for one hour, so that at least one bed is reserved for her alone. Because of the latency phase, Snow White thus manages to forget sexuality for a time. This is not a lasting solution, however, since the mother returns in the guise of a witch to tempt her to enter adult womanhood. Three times Snow White is confronted with a symbol of female finery: a beautiful comb for her hair, a beautiful belt, and finally the apple — half red, half white. The first two times the dwarves manage to save her; that is, pull her back into the latency phase in which sexuality can be ignored. When she accepts the enticing apple, i.e., when the girl realizes how seductive her breasts may be, she is beyond the help of any dwarf. Only the kiss of a handsome prince can save her now.

Thus, fairy tales symbolically pave the way from childhood to adulthood. The girl who listens to Snow White will learn that there will be a time when she will have to accept her female sexuality, that then, there is

no turning back, and that she needs not be anxious if this process should produce a conflict with her mother. E. Drewermann uses this model derived from Bettelheim to interpret the Biblical stories.⁹ In Drewermann's opinion, the Biblical story about the storm on the lake, when the disciples panic while Jesus remains asleep and are subsequently rebuked by him for their lack of faith, may be read in the following way: The water signifies the unconscious, which, to Drewermann, represents all the obscure instinctive forces that people may feel stirring in their inner selves. The lesson taught by Jesus is that these forces should not give rise to panic, that one should have faith that one will not be destroyed by these forces, and that the path toward peace of mind and spirituality presupposes precisely this quiet acceptance of such forces. Many other authors have attempted to interpret a whole range of Biblical stories in the same way, as stories symbolically depicting a psychological development.¹⁰

What is behind these attempts to read various texts (and more particularly various Biblical stories) as symbolic signposts to a proper psychological development, is obviously a moralistic vision of man, which should be of interest here. This is particularly true for Françoise Dolto (mentioned earlier) and Marie Balmary, who have ventured to undertake interpretations of the Bible.¹¹ One should note not only the way these authors, rightly or wrongly, refer to specific biblical scholars (Balmary, for example, swears by A. Chouraqui), but also to the various psychological visions of man that form the basis of their interpretations.¹² It is naturally amusing to follow Balmary's observation that in Gen 17:15 God says to Abraham: "As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah [shall] her name [be]." The change in the name consists of the omission of the iota that signifies the possessive "mine". According to Balmary, this means that the text contains a divine hint about women's liberation. I personally am not so certain that God, in his omniscience, did indeed foresee a time when psychoanalysts would discover the hidden meaning of this omitted iota. I

9. E. Drewermann, *Markusevangelium* 1987-1988.

10. More details in P. Vandermeersch, *Where Will the Water Stick?* 1998.

11. F. Dolto, *L'évangile* 1977-1978; M. Balmary, *Sacrifice interdit* 1986.

12. See the comments on Balmary's book by an analyst who has also dealt with interpretations of the Bible: D. Stein, *Lecture psychanalytique* 1986.

rather believe that Balmary's counter-transference imposed on the text her own ethical values. Here we come to the crucial issue: even if it could be that counter-transference were sometimes an instrument to uncover unconscious processes in an analytic setting, it should be kept under control, so that surfacing unexpected motives are not only noticed but also critically evaluated. In the same way, we should acknowledge that there is nothing reprehensible in one's reading the Bible for the sake of belief, that it is even better if one is able to notice unexpected or shocking elements of the text, but that one should keep a critical mind in this procedure.

Directed to the Reader Response, Focusing on the Pre-Oedipal Level

The examples of reader response presented above clearly focus on Oedipal conflicts and the appraisal of sex differences. However, one can also focus on more primitive structures, which can also be activated by some texts. A typical example of this approach is H. Raguse's study of the Apocalypse, which he stresses gives signals that persuade us to reactivate in a very primitive way the mechanisms of "splitting" and "projective identification" and deactivate other, higher psychical functions.¹³ In the Apocalypse there is an absolute gap between bad and good. The righteous can join the Lamb and rejoice in seeing the suffering of the condemned ones. There is no mercy, no longer any redemption, just a vision of a radically split society, where people are equal only in that they are good or bad.

Such a heavy arousal of primitive mechanisms lurking in the depths of our unconscious is naturally disturbing. One can understand why so many feel uneasy with the Apocalypse, and that people too concerned with its content and making endless computations on its calculations, are not necessarily the most pleasant company to have a beer with. We should, however, be aware that such a form of religiosity exists, and compels us to find a way to bring people to a higher and more elaborate way of believing. This is a difficult task, however, as our usual way of discussing with people (or preaching to them) addresses the more elaborate psychological

13. H. Raguse, *Psychoanalyse* 1993. See also his very clear and didactic book: *Raum des Textes* 1994.

structures such as the Super-Ego, which is not functioning properly when splitting and projective identification dominate inner life. Thus, therapeutic skill is needed to address those people; this is in no way an easy task that everyone can perform. We can, however, give attention to elements in the text that could arouse the same primitive reactions in our own minds, remaining aware that disproportionate reactions are intended to appear, and trying to control them.

The Biblical Scholar is also a Reader...

Let us conclude on a more general basis. What can a biblical scholar learn from psychoanalysis? To begin with, let us stay with the most obvious: a biblical scholar is a human being with an unconscious, which also operates in addition to his or her intellectual skill. This is the basic insight one can gain from psychoanalysis. This is not a matter of learning difficult theories — the essential lies in the adoption of a critical reflex of self-observation. Someone who has undergone psychoanalytic treatment is not constantly applying psychoanalytic categories while, e.g., reading a menu in a restaurant or enjoying the pleasures of love; one does not make interpretations unless they are needed. An analyzed person has, to use the terminology of Microsoft, a second window in the background, scanning for unwanted viruses. In the same way, psychoanalytic experience can accompany the Bible reader or biblical scholar as a technique of self-control.

This psychoanalytic scanning from the background of one's mind operates at the personal, as well as at the professional level. Our personal psychology can determine our choice of certain themes and passages in the text, and even our way of delineating sources and redactions. The most famous example of unconscious influence in exegetic work has been provided by J. Wellhausen. In Gen 24:67 it is stated that Isaac, when he has sexual intercourse with Rebecca, does so in his mother's tent in order to gain consolation. This appeared so shocking for Wellhausen that he supposed the text was corrupted and originally must have been "his *father's* tent" — which was difficult to conceive if Isaac's father was still alive, so he decided to let Abraham die earlier in the text. Actually, you could ask

if Wellhausen was demonstrating his own Oedipal conflicts in his biblical scholarship.¹⁴

Once this basic psychoanalytic attitude has been adopted, one can apply some basic aspects of psychoanalytic theory to a text. The distinction between an Oedipal and a pre-Oedipal level can be a useful beginning. One could take the following steps:

1. Does the text address you at an Oedipal level? How does it do this? Does it merely try to confirm you in a position of obedience (“My son, do not...”, *Didache*) or does it try to bring you to another position? Is this other position what we would call a more autonomous position, with more personal responsibility and/or more pleasure-taking (“Young man, enjoy your youth...”, *Qoh* 11:9)? Or does the text try to make you regress to more primitive stages in psychosexual development? This could happen by stressing the narcissistic structure in your self, your concern with sexual identity; or it could go further in an attempt to stress the more primitive, pre-genital stages in your psychology.
2. We should, of course, pay special attention to the primitive mechanisms described by the Kleinian school. There are two aspects, as I mentioned: the splitting mechanism that opposes absolute good to absolute bad, with all the aggression and intolerance this involves, and the transitional sphere, a regression to and a reactivation of which being not necessarily considered as something unhealthy. We should certainly accept that religion sometimes has for us the same function as the teddy bear from our childhood. On the other hand, when you see an adult collecting dozens of teddy bears, something could be wrong.
3. Finally, but much more difficult: we could re-think the usefulness of some elder psychoanalytic attempts that were indeed too “wild” and did not respect the complexity of biblical texts, but that nevertheless contained useful hints.¹⁵ An example is Freud’s suspicion that history transmits, in a hidden way, repressed memories from one generation to the other. R. Kessler’s circumcision study follows this track.

14. T. Reik, *Unbewusste Faktoren* 1917-1919.

15. S. Freud, *Wilde Psychoanalyse* 1910.

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Chapter 11

Looking Back at Sodom. Psychoanalysis and Diachronic Reading

Patrick Vandermeersch

To ordinary understanding of psychoanalysis, one of the most appealing biblical stories should be that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16 - 19:29). Even to secularised people, the names suggest unrestrained instincts, a turmoil of passions, a libidinal quest without limits. This is the place where, indeed, “wild” psychoanalysis can flourish. Looking down from a “psychoanalytic” balcony, one can point to the violence of intermingled bodies and the various openings of the flesh crying, “a hole is a hole”.¹⁶ In a well-known reference to Hieronymus Bosch (c.: 1450-1516), one might remember the astonishing pictorial representation of the “Garden of Earthly Delights” and the fascinating yet puzzling way that pleasure is represented. This would be the place to shout: “Yes, indeed, our sexuality is built on erotogenic zones; Freud was right!”

However, the method adopted during the five years of the Intensive Erasmus Programme on *Psychoanalysis and Interpretation of Religious Texts* (1996-2000), is based on a different approach. It should start with an analysis of the reader’s response to the Sodom story and thus with a critique of this “wild” psychoanalysis. It should start with a bit of self-observation. To what degree are we tickled by the story? Why does it make us feel uncomfortable — or all too comfortable? Which layer in our personality structure has been addressed? Which elements are we consequently inclined to stress in the text, and which parts are we tempted to skip? Which conceptual categories are we driven to apply in order to get some grip on the material and, in doing so, what are our hidden presuppositions?

For the Sodom story, two questions are likely to receive most of our attention. First, there is the question of the text’s ethical dimension. Does the text indicate us how we should behave ourselves and at what level of

16. These words, referring to Freud in *Das Unbewußte* p. 299, are also an allusion to the well-known “A rose is a rose is a rose”.

our psychology addresses us? Secondly, we should question the concept of “homosexuality” which is frequently applied to the story. Is it the same as our concept of homosexuality — which stems only from the end of the nineteenth century — and is it right to retroject this in the text?

Those questions are psychologically related to each other. Both address the Super-ego and, consequently, the Oedipal structure in the psyche.¹⁷ The ethical question matches the psychology of the upper layer of the Super-ego. As ethics enter a child’s life initially by the mere authority of parent figures, making mature, adult, ethical choices requires that one overcomes the stage of mere obedience and reaches that of autonomous thinking and personal decisions. The internalized authority figures should be questioned. The second element, trying to grasp which form of “homosexuality” is at stake in the minds of the authors of Genesis, is also important for the own Super-ego; it is not only a question directed at the text. It is a way of organizing in the own mind possibly puzzling and frightening representations and labelling them according to what Lacan called “the symbolic order”.¹⁸ When one becomes conscious of the models shaped by culture concerning the initially undifferentiated pleasure principle and when one confronts it with the models (or the lack of models) from the past, the deeper side of the Super-ego — well indicated by the older designation “Ego-ideal” — is reinforced.

For a thorough exegesis of the Sodom story, we should explore those topics extensively. We will not, however, do that here. Rather, we will open those questions just enough to indicate the psychological function of peculiar concern, so familiar to biblical scholars that it mostly remains unquestioned: the splitting up of a text in isolated traditions coming from a more or less distant past.

Reflecting on discussions between psychologists and biblical scholars during a five-year Erasmus program, we thus address the psychology of the historio-critical method in exegesis in the final text of this book.

17. One might imagine that the story would address the pre-oedipal mechanism by arousing more primitive feelings of disgust, aggression, masochistic fear, etc., but this is obviously not the case.

18. See the first essay in this book.

The Bible and the Super-ego

To many people, the Bible contains — or should contain — the truth. To fundamentalistic minds — not only among narrow-minded believers, but also among many militant unbelievers — this truth is understood as relating to the factual reality of the biblical stories. This was the track followed by crude nineteenth century “scientism”: it tried to demonstrate the inanity of the biblical message by emphasizing the impossibility of the creation in seven days and by making jokes about Noah’s Ark, the walls of Jericho, Jesus’ walking on the water, etc.¹⁹ Mainstream believers have meanwhile learned to disentangle the level of the reported “historical” facts and the level of the biblical message. In an Erasmus course, in which Marburg is involved, R. Bultmann comes to mind, the man who radically swept away every mythical element and insisted upon the existential meaning of the Bible. But is skipping the mythical the same as foregoing every historical dimension and reading the bible in a synchronic quest for meaning?

The Sodom story gives us an opportunity to more closely examine how history plays multiple roles in the attempt to get to the core of the biblical message. In this story, the question: “Did it really happen?” is less at stake than the ethical conceptions the story stresses. It is a typical story for an Oedipal reader-response. Thus it provides us with an interesting opportunity to see how historical investigation not only tests the factuality of the story, but also operates as a psychological instrument in an Oedipal confrontation with the biblical message.

Reading from an Oedipal point of view is being sensitive to clearly outspoken interdictions and obligations. We know, however, that not all obligations and prohibitions of the Bible must still be kept as such. Even when we hold the biblical message for something important and inspiring, we do not comply with every precept of Leviticus. Thus we need a method — or at least a tactic — to match the biblical message with our situation and our convictions.

If we do not drop certain precepts without further reflection, we have two major ways to come to grips with reluctant biblical injunctions.

19. See e.g. J.C. Withcomb & H.M. Morris, *Genesis Flood* 1961.

When a particular text hurts our moral sense or makes us feel discriminated, we can stress a corrective part of the Bible. This is the first way. Implicitly, this means — we should acknowledge it — that we make a distinction between better and worse parts of the Bible. The second way which holds up the inspiring value of the Bible in spite of dismissing some statements as no longer acceptable, is to locate them in a specific historical layer of the text. This presupposes an implicit philosophy of history, even if we have become rather cautious about triumphant nineteenth-century belief that our world is getting better and better due to modernity. There are, however, more sophisticated ways to appeal to history, as we shall see; and if a passage is still too harsh to have it neutralized as a remnant of a previous stage of the evolving biblical message, we can still designate it a *Fremdkörper*, stemming from a very old, archaic and extra-biblical world. The perturbing passage is cut off from the mainstream biblical message.

In the case of gay people, who often feel concerned by the Sodom story and protest against discrimination caused by an anti-gay reading of it, we see both techniques at work. On the one hand, they correct the Bible with the Bible. They stress that the story was *not* about sex, but about hospitality, and that the city was destroyed because the violations of the laws pertaining to that domain had been violated.²⁰ In order to counterbalance Genesis, they sometimes point to the frank depiction of the passionate friendship between David and Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:26, or to Jesus' uncomplicated love for John, lying in the former's bosom, mentioned in John 13:23-25 and 21:20. Are these interpretations of the biblical statements on homosexuality correct? Perhaps — why not — and in any case it is not an analyst's task to decide on the pertinence of a biblical scholar's opinion on the original meaning of a text. However, an analyst is struck by the heavy presence of the Oedipal structure maintained during this whole process of the reader's response. Throughout the attempt to impart the Sodom text with a different meaning than its *prima facie* message, the basic conviction that the Bible addresses us with authority is maintained. Moreover, this "authority" is conceived in the particular way of someone addressing someone else by pointing to behaviour that can unequivocally be captured

20. This view was expressed in the pioneering work by D.S. Bailey, *Homosexuality* 1975.

in words: “You should do this” and “you should refrain from that”. The whole process of interpreting the text is carried out in what one might call “Oedipal counter-transference”.

The second way of matching the biblical message with one’s own convictions is introducing some philosophy of history. In the case of the Sodom story, one can argue that the concept of homosexuality emerged at the end of the nineteenth century; that this concept did not just indicate something that had existed before, but that it organized and shaped new forms of sexuality.²¹ As a consequence, the writers of Gen 18 and 19 could not possibly have had modern homosexuality on their minds. Thus, an interpretation of the biblical text should distinguish between the actual, material behaviour depicted and the values incarnated in this behaviour in those days.²² Having disentangled both, respect for the biblical message would mean investigating how to insert the same values into newly existing types of behaviour. This way of making “biblical theology” is substantially the same in the case of sexuality and in this of economics. As well homosexuality as Stock Market are to be evaluated according the same principles.²³

Of the two ways of proceeding, the latter is in fact a more fundamental way of coping with the Super-ego. Instead of counterbalancing one word spoken by authority with another, one dares to imagine oneself as being the authority and say: “If I were you, and I lived in my situation, I would react differently, but I understand that, for various reasons, you had your own opinions.” As we will see, in this inner dialogue with an interiorized other the tyranny of the Super-ego is undermined but its structuring function is preserved.

21. M. Foucault, *Volonté de savoir*, 1976; H. Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature* 2000.

22. See R. Hasbany (ed.), *Homosexuality* 1989; A. Swidler (ed.), *Homosexuality* 1993.

23. In fact, this is the most current way that believers generally try to accommodate the biblical message with open mindedness. Although it obviously functions in practice, some theoretical problems call for further reflection; in particular, it is questionable whether one can conceive of those “values” as something existing in itself that can be transplanted from one cultural setting to another.

Oedipal Structure and the Quest for History

The Sodom story is only one example of the insistence of the Oedipal structure in Bible interpretation. During our five-years Erasmus course, we often experienced a similar reaction to other stories. This was especially the case when we dealt with the depiction of women, not only in the Bible, but also in later Judaism. The fact that these texts were less sacred to the readers' minds was probably the reason that very emotional reactions were allowed to surface. Scholars presenting the opinions of the Rabbis in the classic academic style were summoned to give their own — supposedly opposing — opinions, as if it was intolerable to hear such disdainful views on women without hearing a protest at the same time. The suggestion that those rabbinical views could actually stem from a fear inspired by women did not pacify the audience, on the contrary. Obviously, in respect of those texts, a statement should be issued. If one has some authority — and for some reason, professors are assumed to have authority — one should support the right moral conviction and to conclude that, today, one must not speak about women in such a discriminating manner.

Why is this tendency so strong? Probably because it is hard to overcome the Oedipal structure. Feelings of obligations and prohibitions are more deeper interiorized than one would suspect. In order to overcome irrational reactions generated by the Super-ego, which is the heir of the Oedipus complex, it is not enough to be aware of the proneness of guilt feelings, nor to recall some episodes from childhood in which we experienced punishment, humiliation or disdain. Freud was astonished at how cruel the Super-ego could be and at how much time it took to render it more humane. Consequently, he insisted on the importance of “working through”: even when some repressed memories had reached the level of consciousness, one still needs to speak about them time and again, and meanwhile practice the freedom one has gained in daily life.²⁴

If the Super-ego is so firmly rooted, it is not just because it is the result of a learning process, as behaviouristic psychology might assume. The reason is that the Super-ego has not only an oppressive, but also a

24. S. Freud, *Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten* 1914.

positive function. It gives roots to the individual. This is realised in a dual manner: the Super-ego establishes the individual's own identity, as well the representability of what it prescribes or forbids. The first element is the most obvious one. The Super-ego is a narcissistic formation, as is clearly indicated by the older term given by Freud to the same psychological structure, namely: "Ego-ideal". The Super-ego delivers us the image which we would like to match and seduces us: if you manage to model yourself according to that image, then you will really be "someone". It is unnecessary to say that being rooted in history plays a part here.

The second element is at least as important: the Super-ego identifies and gives clear contours to what appears to be pursued and what is forbidden. To go back to the interpretation of Sodom, or to the protest raised by the rabbinic depiction of women: the Super-ego assembles a series of representations that indicate what it is to be "a woman", or to be "queer". Needless to say the way these representations have been composed into a whole is not always convenient nor pleasant. Neither necessary to say that the cultural-historical setting is also influential here.

To summarize: the Super-ego contains not only the emotional charge of obligation and prohibition, but also some (mostly one-sided and alienating) complexes of representations of what one might wish to do. Freud summarises the ambivalent face of the Super-ego as follows:²⁵

"Its [the Super-ego's] relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: 'You *ought to be* like this (like your father).' It also comprises the prohibition: 'You *may not be* like this (like your father) — that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.' This double aspect of the ego ideal derives from the fact that the ego ideal had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex;..."

The aim of psychoanalytic technique is to make the latter element ("You may not be like this") less a source of self-sabotage, while the former is preserved insofar as it is needed as a support for the "I".²⁶ As interiorised parent-representations play an important part in the Super-ego, one should "deal" with them. One should relativise them, i.e. become really

25. S. Freud, *Ich und Es*, p. 262, Engl. trans. p. 34.

26. In order to avoid substantialisation of "the ego" in the style of Ego-psychology and to keep in line with the lacanian critique of it, I prefer to use "I".

accustomed to the idea that parents too are just individual human beings; that they are born at a certain place and at a certain time from particular parents; that they have shaped their own individuality and their own Super-ego according to models and ideals picked from their milieu. In a word: they were as dependent on their identification process as we are. This is not only true for parents and grandparents, but also for the general cultural setting in which an individual tries to become “someone”.

Gaining historical knowledge is one of the methods for relativising the authority of the internalized parent representations, and it is one of the most effective. There is, however, another way: by comparing different cultures. These two ways reflect two different types of approaches in the study of religion: historical research vs. comparative religion. In the former method one tries to understand the various vicissitudes, contradictions and conflicts in a religious tradition; in the latter one transcends the peculiarities of a particular tradition in order to acquire a broader view on religion as a universal, human phenomenon. Both ways of proceeding are useful; both have their impact on the psychology of the scholar and in most cases they reflect his or her deeper motivation. There is, however, a psychological distinction between both. Delving into history — especially in the history of a family, a people or the own tradition to which one belongs — tackles the Super-ego more than the investigation of distant cultures. In the former case, one admits the identifications which have shaped the own identity, one accepts the confrontation with the inner figures at their source and one “works through” the inner conflicts that were thereby interiorised. In the latter case, such a confrontation with the tensions involved in the own tradition can be avoided. Of course, one becomes aware that completely different life-styles exist and that the way one has been raised was one-sided in many respects, but the idea — which is often the illusion — that one can easily leave the cradle and step over from one identity to another is predominant.²⁷

This does not mean, however, that historical research is automatically “healthier” for the Super-ego than comparative religion. Historical

27. From this point of view, it could be interesting to investigate whether the same psychological distinction can be found in the motivations of students choosing a classical theological education and those enrolled in religious sciences.

research seems very appropriate for one particular defence mechanism of the Super-ego: displacement. This mechanism, strongly apparent in obsessional neurosis, occurs in a milder form in the psychic life of many more or less normal people. The mechanism's essence of it is that it displaces the emotional charge of disturbing representations to harmless ones. The former are thus repressed while the latter become the object of immoderate attention and concern. This frequently happens while in performing historical research, as I personally experienced. Astonished at a flagellation ritual in a Spanish village, I started to research it. Soon, I decided to emphasize the historical dimension of my research, as this seemed to me, as well as to the members of the flagellation brotherhood, an important issue in the personal "understanding" of the ritual.²⁸ As I wrote my book during the same years the Erasmus course ran, I consciously reflected on my reader-response on the material, and I realised more than once that my proneness to accumulating superfluous historical date was surely a form of displacement too: it was a way of escaping from my personal response to the theme of religious masochism — the uncanny within myself.

The Danger of Turning into a Pillar of Salt

In Gen 19:26, Lot's wife looks back at Sodom, and turns into a pillar of salt. Is she a symbol of what obedience to a god should be, or does she represent the historian who surrenders to obsessional mechanisms?

A direct way to investigate possible reader responses to a particular biblical text, is to see how commentaries aimed at helping ministers at their sermons deal with the exegetic material. Most mention that this isolated verse is probably a remnant of a popular belief on the origin of a rock or pillar with a curious configuration, and sometimes they even try to determine which rock could precisely be at the origin of the verse. They usually suppose that it could be a curious rock in the *gebel usdum*, the mountains in the Southwest of the Dead Sea.²⁹

28. My book on the topic should be published soon. Meanwhile, I refer to my article: P. Vandermeersch, *Usage de la flagellation* 1995.

29. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* 1902, p. 187; H. Seebass, *Genesis* [II] 1997, p. 148.

In contrast to the preoccupation with the salty rock, “sodomy” is often only hastily mentioned, despite the fact that this specific sexual act derives its name from that particular biblical passage. A Dutch popular commentary, in a single sentence, says that the Bible naturally considers homosexuality a sin,³⁰ but the commentary then jumps quickly to two other moral issues that seem more appropriate for preaching: the moral duty to offer hospitality and the obligation to care for poor people. The Sodom story is explicitly turned into and even called a “social gospel”.³¹

Looking at this exegesis from some distance, one cannot but be astonished. While the text has been the basic reference for “sodomy” for centuries, this etiological aspect is tacitly ignored, and the preacher is advised *not* to speak about it. Meanwhile, some attention is paid to a possibly etiological function of the story about the pillar of salt. Strange... An instance of the obsessional mechanism? Let us be fair, however. Some commentaries state explicitly that it is not necessary to assign only an etiological function to Gen 19:26, imparting the verse on the pillar of salt with the status of an erratic block coming from a pre-biblical tradition.³² Adding some comparative religion, they say that it is a common religious theme that someone who looks backward to God has to die. This general statement is true, perhaps... Being an analyst, however, I cannot but suspect some return of the repressed when one thereby points not only to the prohibition of seeing the Lord’s face,³³ but also to Orpheus looking back at Euridice after he has saved her from the underworld. In the former case, the Lord let him see from “behind” (Ex 33:23), and in the latter it was not Orpheus who died... But as Gunkel is not lying on my couch, I must limit myself to the general statement that if a remembrance and elucidation of the history of the own tradition is just as important for accommodating with the Super-ego as the remembrance of the personal history, one should also remain aware of the complexity of the present, which prompted us to delve into history. In no religion, nor in any historical research, does

30. “Daarmee wordt niet gezegd, dat de Bijbel de homoseksualiteit zou tolereren; vgl. daartegen bijvoorbeeld Lev 18:22; 20:13.” A. van Sels, *Genesis* 1989, p. 250.

31. A. van Sels, *Genesis* 1989, p. 262. See also *The New Interpreters Bible*, 1994, p. 477.

32. So H. Gunkel, *Genesis* 1902, p. 187.

33. Although Gunkel does not explicitly refer to a particular passage, he obviously points to the theophany to Moses on the Sinai, probably Ex 33:18-23 and not Ex 24:9-10.

unconscious motivation not play a part. If one contemplates the problems religion has had to face the last centuries, it is very understandable that so much theological energy was put into historio-critical reflection on the Bible.

Can historical inquiry ever come to an end? Perhaps this question coincides with the question of whether psychoanalysis can ever come to an end.³⁴ In practice, an analyzed person at best becomes reconciled to the fact that he or she could not be there at the ultimate moment of his or her origin, the moment of his conception. If a miracle could make this — pre-existence is not an unusual fantasy, either — then this moment would expose the love stories of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents... One becomes reconciled, then, to the fact that one cannot reconstruct one's own origin, one tries to enjoy the fact of one's contingent existence, and one also knows that the search for one's origin was perhaps a necessary dialectical moment in one's development. More important than the result of the historical inquiry, and more important than the knowledge of the facts that have been discovered, is perhaps the process that took place within one's own self while digging into the past. Perhaps here the deeper senses of the historio-critical method and of psychoanalysis coincide: both are tools for a dialectical process that one applies to one's own identity.

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34. S. Freud, Endliche und unendliche Analyse, 1937.

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